A photograph of a stream in a jungle. A rope bridge spans the stream, and the water is murky. The surrounding area is dense with green foliage and trees. A rope runs across the top of the frame.

The rope spans the stream where the mishap took place. Shown is the stream at its normal depth of 2 feet.

# "Can Do" Can Kill

*By Carl Frank*

"**C**an do" is an attitude, a spirit, and a way of life, that makes us **Marines**. Unfortunately, that attitude can get Marines needlessly hurt or killed as one rifle company found out while crossing a rain-swollen stream in a jungle.

It was an early spring morning in the jungle. A light but consistent rain had been falling in the training area and nearby mountains since the night before. Deep in the jungle, a squad was halfway through an endurance course when they were struck by a torrential rainstorm, which lasted 15 minutes. When the downpour ended, the squad arrived at a 27-foot-wide stream. It was rain-swollen, 4 to 6 feet above its normal depth of 2 feet, and it was continuing to rise and gain speed. To cross it, the squad had to use a 37-foot, single-strand rope bridge. Manning the obstacle on the near-side bank were two rescue swimmers.

The squad started across the bridge one after another, wearing their gear and with their rifles slung. The first two Marines used the monkey-crawl technique, which required them to traverse the underside of the rope by crossing their feet above the rope and using their hands to pull themselves across. As they crawled along, the rope sagged, and their bodies submerged into the moving water. The swift water swept the first Marine's feet off the rope, but he relied on his strength and used his hands to make it to the far side. The second Marine was able to keep his feet on the rope and made it across.

The third Marine used the commando crawl, which is a face-down technique in which you lay across the top of a rope and crawl. The swift water pushed against his partly submerged body, but he made it across. The fourth and fifth Marines followed, using the monkey




crawl. The water swept their legs off the rope, but they hung on and made it to the far side with a hand-over-hand movement.

The sixth Marine, a lance corporal, reluctantly mounted the rope and yelled to the rescue swimmers that he couldn't swim. One of them suggested he buckle his cartridge belt to the rope to keep from falling, but he didn't do so. As he monkey-crawled, the water rushed over his chest and onto his face, causing him to panic. His legs were swept off the rope twice, but he got them back on and kept moving. The current proved too powerful when he lost his footing a third time. The water swept him away, and he quickly disappeared.

The senior rescue swimmer dove in after the lance corporal, while the other swimmer yelled for the squad to call range control. He then jumped into the water, too. As all three Marines were swept downstream, the squad leader tried to help. He jumped in with his rifle

and all his gear. The lance corporal reappeared, flailing and screaming, within 5 feet of the senior rescue swimmer, but the raging water prevented anyone from reaching him. Several hundred meters downstream, the rescue swimmers and squad leader grabbed tree roots and other vegetation to escape the rapids.

Having heard the call for help over the radio, the course SNCOIC and corpsman arrived on the scene. The SNCOIC decided to run along the bank and intercept the distressed Marines at the swimming hole downstream. Unfortunately, neither the SNCO nor corpsman realized the distressed Marines were farther downstream. The corpsman convinced the staff sergeant that he could get to the swimming hole faster if he got in the water. As soon as the corpsman dove in, the water pulled him under. He struggled to the surface several times and gasped for air. When he reached the far side of the swimming hole, he barely was able to pull himself out.



As they crawled along, the rope sagged, and their bodies submerged into the moving water.

A Marine uses the monkey-crawl technique and ties onto the rope bridge with two carabiners while training at Mountain Warfare Training Center.

The lance corporal never surfaced again, and divers recovered his body 600 meters downstream 12 hours later.

Here are several factors that led to this tragedy:

**Failure to recognize the changing hazards and increasing risks.** The stream conditions had worsened, but neither the rescue swimmers nor the squad leader considered them a hazard.

These factors greatly increased the potential of the Marines being swept away. After the incident, one of the rescue swimmers said he noticed that the water level had risen 5 inches during the time (one to two minutes) the victim was on the bridge.

Investigators determined that the recent and heavy downpour caused the sudden surge. However, there was a less obvious factor that led to the stream swelling 4 to 6 feet above normal—the rain in the mountains from the night before.

**Inadequate precautions.** Neither the lance corporal nor his squad tied onto the rope bridge with a snap link (also called a stubai or caribiner), despite the requirement to do so.

**The lance corporal couldn't swim.** His company commander, squad leader, and squad mates knew it, and they said he was afraid of the water.

Investigators also found several other problems with the training:

**Absence of operational risk management (ORM).** ORM was not a part of the training practices. Dangerous water levels and speed at the rope bridge had not been identified as hazards by the instructors. Hence, the rescue swimmers and squad leader didn't know which conditions were safe and which were dangerous.

**Poor staffing procedures.** The instructors assigned to the training came from the fleet-assistance program, often known as FAP. Because turnover was frequent, instructors were often inadequately trained. This was the first time the rescue swimmers had manned the obstacle.

**The rescue swimmers were not qualified, and their gear was inadequate.** The Marines assigned as the rescue swimmers did not have the skills necessary to conduct a swift-water rescue. At minimum, they should have been qualified as combat water safety swimmers (CWSS)<sup>1</sup> and had received training specific to the hazards of the course. The training policy was to

use the best-qualified swimmers available. In this case, both Marines were water-survival-qualified (WSQ).

The two rescue swimmers had one buoyancy device. The investigators recommended that a shepherd's crook, heaving line, or a life ring be purchased by the unit to assist them in future rescues. 🚫

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**W**hile conditions at the rope bridge were deteriorating, other obstacles along the course were being deluged by the sudden downpour.

**Culvert Obstacle.** The chief instructor visited the culvert obstacle to inspect the rising water level that had been reported to him. The culvert was engulfed with water, and he decided to shut it down.

**Hasty Rappel.** An instructor told the fourth squad to bypass the first obstacle, the hasty rappel, because of the dangerous amount of rain water pouring over the obstacle.

**Stream Run.** When the second squad reached the stream run, the company commander saw that the rising water level had reached a Marine's thighs. The company commander called the Marine back and notified range control. He decided against crossing and began removing his squad from the course.

These events happened within several minutes of the rope-bridge mishap. A few minutes after the stream-run incident, range control ordered everyone by radio to leave the course. The squad at the rope bridge, however, never got the word, despite having a radio. After the incident, plans were made to install a horn that could be heard by Marines throughout the training area. 🚫